

Ahead of the Curve: Considerations of the Alexander Technique as a Mindfulness Modality

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It's hot! It's hip! It's mindfulness! The practice of cognizant attention to one's action and state of being appears, once again, to be rising in popularity in both clinical and popular contexts. Scholarly studies examining mindfulness techniques in and among the high-stress community of college students have found a great deal of efficacy in stress reduction and coping with trauma. As an educator and AT trainee, my explorations of using mindfulness as a way to assist my students underlined the strong similarities between many classical mindfulness modalities and AT.

The struggle to define AT to non-practitioners is a perennial issue that has been extensively documented in the pages of this journal and many other places. I will argue here that AT is a mindfulness modality. It is, as John Austin of the American Center for the AT says, "a form of embodied mindfulness in action." It is a way of accessing "the space between thought and action."³ I will begin by unpacking the concept of mindfulness, then draw parallels with AT, and finally suggest further applications for the Technique.

One of the difficulties of working with the concept of mindfulness is that fact that the term has come to mean many things in differing contexts.⁴ For example, the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale, The Freiburg Mindfulness Inventory, Kentucky Inventory of Mindfulness Skills, as well as the Cognitive and Affective Mindfulness Scale are all psychological measurement instruments that define the concept of mindfulness slightly differently. For example, while the Kentucky Inventory conceives and measures mindfulness within the confines of Dialectical Behavioral Therapy, the Freiburg Inventory was designed to measure mindfulness comparatively among more and less experienced practitioners, particularly with an eye toward growth. This lack of an operational definition can make it difficult to account for the efficacy of mindfulness. Given this proliferation of contemporary meanings for mindfulness, it is useful to return to classical definitions and the origins of mindfulness practice.

Writing for the *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, Lobsang Rappagay and Alexander Bystrisky outline the history of classical mindfulness, stressing particularly its roots in the teachings of the Buddha. They point out that mindfulness is rooted in teachings focused on concentration and insight meditation with variations among the various Buddhist communities stemming from differences in emphasis (152-153). Contemporary mindfulness definitions and practices are prolific, but in essence mindfulness is an ancient practice stemming from Buddhist traditions. Indeed, Rappagay and Bystrisky point to contemporary mindfulness's adaptation away from religious practice as a major reason for difficulties facing the way it works and can be used. Their great concern is "the current movement to psychologize and secularize mindfulness without

³ See <http://www.acatnyc.org/main/2015/04/10/mindfulness-and-the-alexander-technique>.

⁴ For an excellent discussion of this, as well as the sociological difficulties of the concept, see Virginia Heffernan's "The Muddied Meaning of Mindfulness," in *New York Times Magazine*.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/19/magazine/the-muddied-meaning-of-mindfulness.html>

fully understanding the model of cognition and perception that explains mindfulness in the classical literature” (149). In an effort to make it more palatable to a largely secular Western community, many contemporary mindfulness theorists and practitioners have significantly changed the emphasis of their work toward more secular descriptions of mindfulness. Given this shift, it becomes important to find some working definitions of mindfulness in order to fully explore what the technique has to offer.

A working definition of mindfulness should take into consideration the ways it has been practiced in both historical and contemporary contexts. For example, a definition that focuses purely on ancient forms would miss recent innovations, while a focus on purely contemporary practice would ignore the roots of mindfulness in Buddhism. Scott Bishop and his colleagues, in their examination of various mindfulness approaches, reached an operational definition of mindfulness as a set of mental processes through which practitioners can begin to notice their maladaptive thoughts and feelings in order to improve them and their behaviors in everyday life (230-241). Essentially, a working definition of mindfulness is that it is a way to help practitioners function more effectively day to day. The strong similarities to various working definitions of AT will not be lost on anybody with a passing familiarity with it. Of his work, Alexander himself said,

For this reason, I claim that the primary requirements in dealing with all specific symptoms is to prevent the misdirection which leads to wrong use and functioning, and to establish in its place a new and satisfactory direction as a means of bringing about an improvement in use and functioning throughout the organism” (*Use of the Self* 24).

Proper use and functioning go hand in hand with improvement in adaptive thinking.

We should take a moment to be clear about the fact that mindfulness as Bishop, Rappagay, Bystrisky and company use the term is not a relaxation method. All too often, in contemporary practice, mindfulness is closely allied with or the term is used interchangeably with relaxation. In this case, particularly in approaches that encourage closed eyes or a retreat to a calming visualization, relaxation can be understood as a way of wiping the mind of stimuli, providing a clean slate from which to work. But nowhere do any of the above authors discuss relaxation as a key component to mindfulness. Rappagay and Bystrisky even go so far as to emphasize that mindfulness is “an active, engaged and not a detached, non-reactive process” (151). The key is not to disengage with stimulus, but instead to approach it in the most effective way possible.

In moving beyond an operational definition, what is the process of classical mindfulness? It is, after all, a process. Rappagay and Bystrisky emphasize this when they point out that the key functions of mindfulness are not its objects but how well a practitioner is capable of relating to them (159). The first step in effective mindfulness practice is the cultivation of attention and awareness. Though these terms are sometimes used interchangeably, it is worth noting that they are not the same thing in practice. Attention, in this case, is the ability to develop a strong and stable focus on the object of the attention. Bill Conable has referred to this as a “reader’s attention.” In order to read this page of text, you need to hold it still. It will need stability so your eyes can process it. In mindfulness, attention is needed in order to experience a stimulus vividly and fully (155). Traditional meditation practices usually focus attention on the breath because it is central to human existence and a natural and simple activity. The overall goal is to develop something called “bare attention,” through which the practitioner is capable of paying attention to

a stimulus without it consuming their full consciousness. It is a way of knowing that it is stripped of associative and evaluative meanings.

Attention is accompanied in this practice with awareness. In this case, awareness is the ability to remain awake to experiences or stimuli that arise to consciousness while one is paying attention to the object (Conable 156). The object, in this case, being one's breath or direction. Awareness is the part of the process that has become most misunderstood in many contemporary practices. Individuals are often told, while meditating, to "accept whatever comes up." The idea of nonjudgmentally accepting thoughts and stimuli can easily hamper an attempt to correct the thought if it is not useful. Thus, awareness is not necessarily accepting the thought, but accepting that the thought is happening. This can allow the practitioner to effectively label and deal with the thought, as opposed to either passively "accepting" it or attempting to quash it. Attention and awareness thus work together to keep the individual cognizant of their full experience while being able to focus on specific tasks. The Buddha compared these two elements to a pair of oxen pulling a cart up a hill. Yoked side by side, the animals must work together harmoniously in order to reach the summit. It is this interplay of attention and awareness, with some minor variations, that comprises AT.

One can easily find parallels in AT to classical mindfulness techniques. The goal of both is improved functioning in everyday life. Just as mindfulness seeks to improve adaptive behaviors, Alexander's process seeks to improve physical coordination. Cathy Madden points out in her book *Onstage Synergy* that "The Alexander Technique is a 'how' rather than a 'what', so using it requires that you always *always always* use it in connection with a present moment action" (29). Being mindful, or having good use, doesn't really benefit individuals if they are not actually doing anything with it. Mindfulness practice, the ability to pay attention to your breathing while remaining aware, is not an end in itself. Neither is the primary control or the process of inhibition, a core concept for the AT. Yet it is telling that we can find additional parallels to mindfulness practice when it is compared to the pursuit of improved functioning in Alexander practice.

We can draw parallels between mindful attention and awareness and Alexander's description of how his process works:

Lastly, I discovered that after I had become familiar with the combined process of giving the directions for the new "means-whereby" in their sequence and of employing the various corresponding mechanisms in order to bring about the new use, I must continue this process in my practice for a considerable time before actually attempting to employ the new "means-whereby" for the purpose of speaking" (*Use of the Self* 18).

We can liken the giving of directions while simultaneously performing an action during AT practice to the relationship between attention and awareness in classical mindfulness practice. For both, practitioners must attend to desired action while remaining aware of directions toward accomplishing that action. Alexander practice and mindfulness are both facilities that need to be developed over time, naturally. But the accomplishment is the same: improved functioning and use. Alexander reminds us that "when a wrong habitual use has been cultivated in a person for whatever purpose, its influence in the early stages of the lessons is practically irresistible" (*Use of the Self* 11). As any teacher who has observed a student struggle in early AT lessons can attest, the ability to hold both directions and actions in the mind simultaneously is something that must be

cultivated. John Austin points out that in the development of this skill, "Here's where AT is invaluable. Through hands on experiences from a teacher your awareness of your self is significantly improved so it doesn't require so much effort to pay attention to what you're doing.⁵ In both cases, the teacher is present to assist the student in improving coordination.

Despite strong similarities, one of the prime difficulties with comparing AT with mindfulness techniques lies in the term mindfulness itself because it implies separation between psychological and physical functions. Alexander says very specifically in *The Use of the Self*:

I must admit that when I began my investigation, I, in common with most people, conceived of "body" and "mind" as separate parts of the same organism, and consequently believed that human ills, difficulties and shortcomings could be classified as either "mental" or "physical" My practical experiences, however, led me to abandon this point of view (1).

However, it is worth noting that like Alexander's conception of his technique, classical mindfulness practice, despite its name, focuses not only on a continuous cognitive awareness of thoughts, but also of sensory awareness. Many contemporary mindfulness techniques emphasize mental techniques at the expense of the physical body. This difference is one of the major reasons I specify that AT is a form of "embodied mindfulness." It is an attention and awareness that encompasses the psychophysical whole in both practices.

Placing AT among a variety of mindfulness techniques is essentially an attempt to provide a workable explanation to non-practitioners while also suggesting substantial possibilities for further applications of AT. Given the positive results of the 2002 study of AT for people with idiopathic Parkinson's disease (Stallinbrass 695-708) and the 2008 study in the *British Medical Journal* exploring applications for recurrent chronic back pain (Little et al), it is worth exploring what other possible applications exist for AT. AT was found in these studies to have palliative effects on both back pain and Parkinson's disease, but currently there has been no study exploring AT and stress relief specifically. The strong affinities between mindfulness, which has been shown effective in stress relief, and AT suggest additional avenues of study. For example, it may be worth examining the potential for stress relief among high-stress populations using AT.

If we accept close kinship between AT and mindfulness, it is worth noting that varying mindfulness techniques have been shown to be useful for stress reduction at differing levels of efficacy. An analysis of numerous studies has indicated some encouraging results in general:

The consistent and relatively strong level of effect sizes across very different types of sample indicates that mindfulness training might enhance general features of coping with distress and disability in everyday life, as well as under more extraordinary conditions of serious disorder or stress (Grossman 39)

Grossman and his colleagues chose the stress reduction and back pain studies because of their scientific rigor such as the use of control groups and large sample sizes and have found mindfulness techniques to be consistently effective across these studies. Though Grossman and

⁵ See <http://www.acatnyc.org/main/2015/04/10/mindfulness-and-the-alexander-technique>.

his colleagues specifically address Jon Cabot-Zinn's Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction, other mindfulness techniques can be used in stress relief.

The use of the Mindful Awareness Practices technique, which was developed at the University of California, Los Angeles, was examined in a study at California State University, Dominguez Hills and found to be effective in stress reduction. The technique was introduced as part of a college introductory course in part to see if such techniques could be integrated into a college curriculum. Kiyomi Yamada and Tara Victor, who conducted the study, found that integrating mindfulness techniques into the classroom was, "associated with the cultivation of mindfulness traits, as well as lower levels of rumination and state anxiety" (143). In essence, there was a reduction on the part of the participants in their perception of stress. Though this is a beneficial result, another result that the study sought was an answer to the question of whether or not mindfulness might also improve student learning outcomes. Though the study did not find evidence of this, that may have to do with the specifics of the mindfulness approach utilized. Mindful Awareness Practices is practiced in physical stillness and is a reflective approach to guided meditation as opposed to an active, psychophysical intervention like AT approaches. The use of a more holistic approach may yield a more desirable result. I would like to suggest that failed element of Yamada and Victor's approach, the lack of improvement in learning outcomes, may be addressed by utilizing a psychophysical approach to mindfulness, acknowledging that mind and body cannot be effectively separated.

Interventions that address both mind and body in their techniques have demonstrated significant improvement in coping abilities with stress. A 2002 study at the Mind/Body Medical Institute at the Harvard Medical School found significant reductions in stress and state anxiety and were paired with health-promoting behaviors. Students were trained in both Relaxation Response (RR), a physical technique, as well as Cognitive Behavioral Interventions (CBI), a psychological approach. The significant difference between this and other interventions previously tested in the Harvard study made use of both physical and mental interventions, addressing the psychophysical whole, as opposed to relying on a purely cognitive approach. The participants in the study, all students at Harvard University, initially reported significantly elevated stress levels, but following the intervention reported stress levels not only below those of the control group, but also levels significantly lower than those of the general student population. In fact, symptoms fell to a nonclinical range for adults (Deckro 286). Though labor-intensive, this holistic approach consisted of nearly six weeks of training sessions. The RR/CBI approach was effective at addressing the physical and psychological needs of stress reduction, achieving significant and sustained results. Similar holistic approaches, such as AT, may find similar successes in the field of stress reduction.

The case for considering AT as a form of "embodied mindfulness" and therefore a candidate for successful stress relief has potential support from a study recently conducted at the University of Pittsburgh. Though the mind/body connection is often taken on faith by many in the somatic disciplines, the Pittsburgh research group found strong connections between the primary motor cortex and the adrenal medulla, the part of the brain that controls stress reactions in primates. The team wrote in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* that their "observations suggest that there is a link between descending control of 'core muscles' and the regulation of sympathetic output. This link may provide a neural substrate for the control of stress through 'core' exercises" (Dum 9925). Essentially, we now have an anatomical basis for the inextricable connection of body and mind. In this case, the neurons for each are intermeshed, potentially

explaining the stress relief potential of various exercises. Note the potential for such activation in Frank Pierce Jones' description of the Alexander process:

Applying light pressure with the hands, the demonstrator changes the balance of the subject's head in such a way that the muscles at the nape of the neck lengthen.... Properly carried out, the procedure will establish a new dynamic balance between the weight of the head and the tonus of the muscles so that within a limited range the head behaves like an inertial system which can move... without any feeling of weight (5).

The rebalancing of this inertial system engages the motor cortex in keeping the body upright in the gravitational field. Finding the optimal balance means the brain must work differently, outside of its habitual use, allowing for movement and adjustment as opposed to simply holding oneself upright. Further, we should note the feeling of lightness mentioned by Jones, as a pleasant sensory experience that can provide additional stress relief. Specialists on sensory neurology, commenting on the results of the University of Pittsburgh study, pointed to additional linkages between the sensory cortex and adrenal medulla. This provides some explanation concerning why we might find particular sensory experiences, such as the feeling of lightness mentioned by Jones, to be pleasant (Hamblin).⁶ On top of this, reliable sensory feedback is necessary in order to effectively approach mindfulness. Alexander himself wrote about the importance of reliable sensory feedback throughout his work, but perhaps nowhere more clearly than in *Use of the Self*:

The belief is very generally held that if once we are told what to do in order to correct the wrong way of doing something, we can do it, and that if we feel we are doing it, all is well. All my experience, however, goes to show that this belief is a delusion" (10).

In other words, until we can rely upon our sensory feedback, we cannot hope to cultivate both attention and awareness in ourselves. Each of these elements go hand in hand, or are yoked together (to reuse the Buddhist metaphor) in order to help the individual toward optimal functioning. This optimal functioning cannot come until, as Alexander puts it, "the pupil learns to stop trying to get things right and stops working blindly toward his ends. He must give thought, instead, to the means of achieving his ends" (*Constructive Conscious Control* 97). In order for the student to work effectively, we must open up space between the stimulus and action. This is the heart of mindfulness practice as well.

Given the demonstrated efficacy of mindfulness practice on stress relief and the fact that a holistic intervention proved significantly more effective than a purely cognitive one, new avenues for AT open up. Just as it has proven successful against low back pain and the symptoms of Parkinson's disease, so too can the AT be used in the reduction of stress. Though there have been no quantitative studies on this specific subject, parallels with proven mindfulness techniques, as well as new discoveries in neurology, suggest that AT work could be effective. In approaching the AT as "embodied mindfulness in action," we have a powerful shorthand for referring to a complex, but useful, technique. After all, as Theodore Dimon suggests in *A New Model of Man's Conscious*

⁶ See <http://www.theatlatnic.com/science/archive/2016/08/cortical-adrenal-orchestra/496679>

Development, "The real problem of stress--and the key to an educational and scientific model of conscious awareness in living--is not how to lower it but how to live more consciously" (101).

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